Lay of the Land

by

Seanan McGuire
Alice stood perfectly still in the middle of the library, as if stillness and silence would magically be enough to save her from what was about to happen. She kept her hands folded behind her back, her chin up, and her heels together, every inch the dutiful daughter who would *never* intentionally upset her father, would *never* run off into the woods to chase a dangerous rumor, and would certainly *never* be found asleep on a couch belonging to a member of the Covenant of St. George. Why, there wasn’t enough *never* in the world!

It was really too bad that her father had met her before.

“I don’t think you understand the situation, Alice, and that worries me, because God knows you’ve had it explained to you thoroughly enough,” said Jonathan. He sounded exhausted, like he hadn’t slept in a week. The dark circles under his eyes were even more telling. “I’d have you out of Buckley tonight if there was any place for us to go. That’s how dangerous this is. Do you understand?”

*I understand that you’ve been looking for an excuse to get me out of Buckley since Mama died,* thought Alice. Aloud, she said only, “I understand better than you think I do. I’m just not going to lock myself in the attic until Mr. Price leaves town. He was a gentleman, Daddy! He let me in even though he didn’t have to, even though he didn’t know who I was. He thought I was just some little girl who got lost in the woods, and he opened his door for me. Why would he have done that if he were as bad as you say?”

“Because you look like your grandmother, and your grandmother looks like every other Carew girl who ever picked up a rifle and said she’d do as the Covenant bid,” said Jonathan. “You carry your ancestors with you, and he’s Covenant bred. He knows what a Carew looks like. He read your face like a book, and he let you inside because he wanted you to trust him. That’s what they *do.*”

“I thought they killed people,” Alice said. “Innocent people, like Aunt Mary or Uncle Naga.”

“The Covenant has never concerned itself much with ghosts,” said Jonathan, before he thought better of it. He shook his head. “That’s beside the point. The Covenant doesn’t just come in guns blazing. That would be counter-productive. They come in carefully, they get the lay of the land, and then they strike. You’re young enough that they might see you as a potential asset. All they’d need to do is twist your mind and convince you that they’re the good guys.”

“That’s not going to happen,” said Alice. “I am not going to join the Covenant of St. George just because some nice man lets me sleep on his couch.”

Jonathan rubbed his face with one hand. “I am not getting through to you at all, am I? I’m trying to keep you *safe,* Alice. That means I’m not thinking of whether you want to stay away from Mr. Price. I’m thinking of whether staying away from him will keep you *safe.* As your father, and as the one with more experience dealing with the Covenant, I am ordering you to stay away from the Parrish Place. Do not associate with this man. Do not ‘accidentally’ wind up in the woods behind his house. Leave him alone. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Daddy, but—”

“Good. Then we’re done talking about it.” He stepped forward, smoothing her hair back from her face before pressing a kiss against her forehead. “Oh, Alice. You’re all I have. You know that, don’t you? That’s why I worry about you so much. That’s why I need you to listen to me.”
Alice—who loved her father, even as she chafed against the restrictions he was increasingly heaping on her—ducked her chin to keep him from seeing the look in her eyes. “I do listen, Daddy. I promise I do.”

“Good girl,” he said. “Stay away from the Parrish Place. Mind me, now, and we’ll be just fine.”

He walked out of the library, leaving his silent, not at all dutiful daughter behind.

Alice waited in the library until she heard the front door slam: her father heading off to work at the real library, the Buckley Township Library, which was larger and quieter and had a lot fewer books on how to take things apart. Her father and her grandfather had both worked there for as long as she could remember. People had started to mutter about her grandfather needing to retire, and she supposed he probably would, soon enough, if only to keep people from making a fuss. Nobody hated a fuss like her grandpa.

Cautiously, and fully aware of the consequences if she timed this wrong, Alice stuck her head out of the library and looked up and down the hall. Nothing moved, not even a mouse: the Aeslin were all up in the attic, involved in a three-day ceremony honoring her Great-Grandmother Caroline and something impressive she’d done with a bed sheet. Alice was sure it was more complicated than it sounded—mouse rituals generally were—but she had long since learned not to ask.

Sure now that her father wasn’t lurking to pounce on her and continue his lecture about trusting strangers from the Covenant, Alice crept down the hall to the front room, where she peeped out the window and confirmed that her father’s truck was no longer parked in the driveway. He was gone, then, really and truly, and she could breathe again.

Her father was a good man; her father loved her; her father’s ability to cope with the thought that she might get hurt was virtually nonexistent. She had known these things for most of her life. Sometimes they felt like all she had to hold on to. Those, and her grandparents, who somehow managed to love her without any of her father’s reservations. They looked at her and didn’t see her mother’s ghost. That seemed to make all the difference. When Jonathan was around, it was like all the air got sucked out of the room and replaced with formaldehyde. She couldn’t breathe; she couldn’t move. All she could do was float, endlessly preserved, in the amber sea of his concern.

Alice walked back down the hall, passing the library, until she reached the kitchen door and stuck her head inside. As she had hoped, her grandmother was still where she had been earlier: sitting at the kitchen table with a leather-bound book open in front of her, meticulously transcribing the last month’s-worth of observations about the local wildlife. Tracking the jackalope herds was a manual process, but it was worth it, if it helped them to know when the migrations would happen.

“Grandma?”

Enid looked up, and smiled at the sight of Alice’s head peeking around the doorframe. “Hello, sweetheart. There’s some shortbread next to the stove. What are you still doing inside? It’s a beautiful day. You should be out enjoying it.”

“Daddy just left,” said Alice, walking into the kitchen and heading directly for the promised shortbread. She was always hungry these days, partially due to having to refuse seconds at mealtimes: her father would ask why she was eating so many eggs, and she would stammer and stutter over her answer, knowing all the while that if he had any indication that she was running around the woods at
night, she’d wind up grounded. Again.

Since she was already grounded, she could probably have gotten away with double helpings, but then her father might have figured out that she was sneaking out her window every night, and who needed that sort of stress?

“I see,” said Enid. She watched Alice pick up three pieces of shortbread before suggesting, mildly, “There’s also lemonade, if you want to be able to swallow all that.”

“Thanks, Grandma.” For a moment, everything was quiet and clanking as Alice fixed her afternoon snack. Finally, she came to sit at the table across from her grandmother, setting the plate of shortbread and glass of lemonade in front of herself.

The silence continued. Alice cleared her throat.

“Grandma?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Did you…hear what we were talking about?”

Enid closed the book and set her pen aside. She’d been waiting for Alice to work her way around to this conversation for days. Now that they were finally going to have it, she was going to give the girl her full attention. “I heard parts of it.”

“Is he…I mean…when he says…” Alice stopped and waved her hands helplessly, like she could encompass all the missing parts of her sentences with a few simple motions. It didn’t work. Defeated, she slumped in her seat, and said, “I just don’t understand.”

“Which part don’t you understand?”

“How Mr. Price could have known I’d come out of the woods right behind his house,” said Alice. “Daddy thinks he was laying a trap for me, because he’s Covenant and they’re all sneaky and clever and stuff. But I just don’t see how that makes sense. I didn’t know where I was going to come out of the woods. I sure couldn’t have told you when I was going to come out of the woods. So how could somebody who didn’t know the woods as well as I do guess when and where I’d be popping out?”

“What do you think happened, Alice?”

“I think my timing was just good,” she said. “He turned his lights on. I followed them out of the trees. If he hadn’t turned the lights on, or if I’d been facing another direction, I wouldn’t have come out where I did. I would have kept going until I saw a different house, and I would have come out there.”

“So do you think there’s any chance that Mr. Price heard you moving around in the trees, and decided to lure you into the open?”

Alice snorted. “Gosh, no. Even if he’d been waiting on the porch when I walked up, I was being pretty quiet. He would’ve had to be in the woods with me to have heard me coming, and then I would have heard him. He looked plenty surprised to find me on his porch, too. I don’t think I was the Welcome Wagon he was expecting.”

“Yes, well, he was a little preoccupied with the idea that the real Welcome Wagon was going to shoot him in the head and bury him out in the swamp.” Enid failed to suppress her smile. To be fair, she hadn’t tried particularly hard. “He came here while you were asleep in his living room, you know.”
“I figured he must’ve, or you wouldn’t have ended up there to get me,” said Alice. “Isn’t that why Daddy’s so mad?”

“Yes, but dear, he didn’t know you were our grandchild when he came to the house,” said Enid. “He wanted to let us know that the Covenant had sent him to Buckley to keep an eye on us and report back about our activities—and more importantly, he wanted us to know that he wasn’t going to do it. I’m not sure what his story is, but I got the feeling he’d been sent here because he did something naughty, and now the Covenant wants to punish him.”

Alice’s eyes had gone wide and round. “He’s spying on us?” she asked, voice barely above a squeak.

“No, he’s not,” said Enid. “He’s supposed to be. That isn’t the same as actually doing it. He’s a Price. If he says he’s not going to follow an order he’s decided he dislikes, he’s not going to follow it.”

“What does him being a Price have to do with anything?” asked Alice, her shocked expression giving way to a frown.

Enid smiled. “Sometimes I forget what a good job we did of raising you outside of the Covenant’s reach. There are things that every proper Covenant girl knows long before she comes of age. Never step out with a Falls boy, as they tend to have wandering hands. Never go into a fight against anything bigger than a manticore unless you have a Brandt or a Carew with you. And never ask a Price to go back on their word.”

“You can’t breed for personality types,” said Alice.

“Oh, really. Tell me more about this lack of specialization, my violent, excitable child of a violent, excitable woman.” Enid’s smile softened around the edges, as it always did when she was thinking about Fran. “We’re all the children of our parents, both by blood and by the way they raised us. There’s always some variance, of course, but I’d trust any Price man I’d ever met to keep his word all the way to the end of the world. He’s not going to hurt us, Ally, even if he’s supposed to be keeping an eye on us for the Covenant. If anything, having him here will offer a certain measure of protection.”

“Because the Covenant won’t send anyone else while he’s here?” Alice ventured.

“Exactly. If he wants to sit in the Parrish Place and pretend to be spying on us, that means we can keep breathing.”

Alice hesitated. “Grandma?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Why is the Covenant interested in us again? I mean, I’ve never seen them before. I thought we’d been forgotten and written off.”

“I think…” Enid stopped, picked up her coffee, and took a sip to steady herself before she continued, “I think they must have finally heard about your mother. We didn’t hide it when she died. We invited everyone she’d ever touched, and it’s been long enough now that news will have spread. Some trapping team up in Canada, or execution detail down in Argentina will have heard the news that Frances Healy, the Star of New Mexico, is dead. That means we’re weaker than we were. That means it’s worth coming to see if we’re finally weak enough.”
“Oh.” Alice frowned. “But you don’t think Mr. Price is a part of that.”

“No, I don’t. If he were, I really do believe he would have told us so. The Covenant isn’t all bad, Ally; I’d be lying to you if I tried to tell you that they were.”


“You can’t kill what’s already dead; Mary is safe from anything short of an exorcism. But you’re right that the Covenant tends to shoot first and ask questions never. At the same time, the Covenant takes care of their own. They let women have jobs and positions of authority and guns—do you know how many organizations would have been willing to let me learn how to shoot when I was your age?” Enid shook her head. “No one is the bad guy in their own story. You have to remember that. The Covenant did a lot of good in their time, when humanity was in a more precarious position. Now, well. We walked away for legitimate reasons. Even the best orders, given with the best of intentions, can eventually turn sour when they’re followed without thought.”

“Do you think Mr. Price follows orders without thinking?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh.” Alice looked at her shortbread. Then she looked at the kitchen around them. It was warm, comfortable, and familiar: in a very real way, it represented the only life she’d ever known, a life that she knew absolutely could have been enough for her, if she’d been allowed to live it without her father constantly trying to shape her according to his own ideas. She was free here. She was trapped here. She needed something to change.

“Grandma,” she said, abruptly. “Do we have enough of that shortbread for me to take some as a housewarming gift? I didn’t see much of the house before you came to get me, but it seems to me that Mr. Price didn’t bring much in the way of cooking equipment, and I can’t imagine the Parrish Place is the most comfortable thing ever.”

Enid smiled. “I made an extra plate,” she said, and stood. “Let me help you wrap it up.”

Getting from the Healy House to the Parrish Place was relatively straightforward: all Alice had to do was balance the plate of carefully-foiled shortbread on her bike’s basket and avoid potholes, oncoming traffic, mud puddles, and anyone who might possibly recognize her and mention her little outing to her father. It wasn’t so much her being outside when she was supposed to be grounded—most people didn’t know she was in trouble, since it was sort of difficult to explain why—as it was her being out on her bike in dungarees and hiking shoes. That was the sort of thing that was expected of a teen boy, or of the twelve-year-old tomboy she still regretted outgrowing. It wasn’t the proper attire for a young lady, especially not one who was going calling, alone, on an unmarried man who’d only been in town for a week.

She was sort of counting on the inappropriateness of her clothing to help her get away with what she was doing. Her grandfather’s jacket was three sizes too big for her, and her father’s hunting cap did a decent job of hiding her hair. No one who got a close look would ever take her for a boy, but if she was careful, she could prevent that from happening.

Except for Mr. Price, of course. There was no way to keep him from looking, since she was going to his house. Which was even less appropriate than her clothing. At least her grandmother knew, and
seemed to approve, in her quiet, noncommittal way. It was hard sometimes to tell whether or not Grandma Enid actually approved of something, or just wanted to see how badly it was all going to fall apart. Either way, she’d given Alice a plate of shortbread and looked the other way as she snuck out the back door, so Alice supposed she had her grandmother’s blessing. Whatever good that was going to do.

She turned onto Old Logger’s Road, only wobbling a little as she steered around the ruts in the dirt, and angled toward the last house before the woods took over: the old Parrish Place, site of a particularly brutal series of murders, according to gossip at school. Her grandfather had always refused to actually discuss the details of what had happened there—her protests that knowing for sure whether old man Parrish had eaten half of his teenage son would really increase her social standing had fallen on deaf ears—but he’d at least been able to confirm that the murders were a real thing, not just a local legend.

Someone had taken it upon themselves to paint the house when it was sold. Alice wasn’t sure that turning a supposedly haunted murder house the color of slime mold was really an improvement, but she didn’t have to live there. Maybe Mr. Price would repaint after he’d gotten settled.

The shadows around the house were deep and twisted, like they were being cast by some unseen light source. Alice looked up at the sky as she parked her bike, squinting a little. The sun looked normal enough. Must’ve been some quirk of the architecture. “That’s what you get for living in a murder house,” she said philosophically, and started for the porch.

It was hard not to pick out all the broken pieces as she walked. The swing that used to hang from those rusted old chains was long gone; the middle step was broken; whoever decided to paint the house hadn’t bothered to scrape off the old paint first, and where it peeled, it revealed the house’s original reddish-brown, like a corpse slowly rotting in the sun.

The doorbell didn’t work. Alice tried it twice before raising her hand and rapping her knuckles briskly against that rotting-flesh colored door.

There was a crash from inside, as if someone had been trying to load a bookshelf and had lost their balance at the sound of an unexpected knock. Alice bit her lip to stop herself from smiling. It wouldn’t do to make the man think she was making fun of him when she was just trying to be neighborly.

She had counted silently to fifteen when the door was unlocked, and opened, and there was Thomas Price, blinking at her in the afternoon light. Anything clever she might have been planning to say was promptly lost to the winds of time as she got a good look at him when he had slept, and showered, and wasn’t dressed like an undertaker preparing for a funeral. Travel was not, it seemed, the best thing for him. Living in a horrifying murder house, on the other hand…

He was still tall and thin, with cheekbones that looked like they could be used to slice bread. But he looked much more relaxed, which had the odd effect of making those cheekbones seem much less severe. He was wearing a pair of khaki slacks, like something from a military uniform, and a button-down shirt that had been rolled to the elbows, exposing the colorful tattoos covering his arms. A few more tattoos showed at the top of shirt, following the line of his sternum and collarbones.

“Um,” said Alice.

For his part, Thomas looked first surprised and then pleased. “Miss Healy. I didn’t expect to see you again so soon! I was honestly worried that I’d managed to get you into trouble by telling your grandparents that you were here.”
“Um,” said Alice again. She thrust the plate she was carrying at him. “Shortbread. Runic. Um. I mean, it’s runic shortbread, it’s been painted with lemon sigils to prevent demonic possession and improve digestion and I thought it might be nice to bring you some baked goods since you probably haven’t started baking yet. If you bake. Do you bake? Wait. Here.”

Thomas blinked and took the plate. Alice’s appearance had been a surprise. Alice’s apparent separation from the English language was a bit more complicated. “Thank you. I don’t bake, as a rule, so this is very welcome. Did you make the shortbread?”

“No, my grandmother.” Simple questions were apparently still okay. Alice huffed out a breath in relief. “She says hello, and hopes you’re settling in well.”

“Please give her my regards.” Thomas stepped to the side, gesturing to the living room behind him. It had acquired several boxes of books from somewhere. The same couch was still there. “Would you like to come in?”

“No, thank you,” said Alice. Before she could seem rude, she hastened to add, “My father isn’t sure you’re not here to make trouble, so I figure it’s best if I don’t go in. Besides, it’s the old Parrish place. It gives me the willies.”

“You’re not the only one,” said Thomas. He set the shortbread down on a small table next to the door. “Well, if it’s not a terrible imposition, and since you’re here, would you mind showing me around the area behind my house? I don’t want to be eaten by something I haven’t been introduced to yet.”

“I’d be happy to,” said Alice’s mouth, before her brain could catch up with it and properly point out what a terrible idea this was. She winced, but only a little.

Walking around the woods with Thomas Price didn’t really feel like such a hardship.

“I’ll get my jacket,” said Thomas, and vanished back into the house, leaving Alice standing alone and empty-handed on the front porch.

Alice didn’t do well with empty hands. She produced a knife from inside her jacket and began spinning it between her fingers, slowly at first, and then with increasing speed, until all of her attention was focused on the spinning blade.

The sound of a throat being cleared in the doorway was surprising enough that she jumped, head jerking up. The knife clattered to the porch. After a quick glance to confirm that she hadn’t sliced her fingers open, Alice bent, cheeks burning, and recovered the knife, making it disappear back into her jacket.

“That was some admirable knife work, Miss Healy,” said Thomas. “Have you been formally trained, or are you self-taught?”

“A little of both—Grandma teaches me when she can get away with it, and I work on my own when she can’t,” said Alice. “The mice are pretty helpful, too. They remember my mama working with her knives—she was circus folk, and she had a knife-throwing routine. They can’t demonstrate so much, but they’re good about talking me through things.”

“The mice,” said Thomas, with a slow blink.

“Yeah. We have a colony. In our attic. Um. Aeslin mice? Have you ever heard of those?”
Thomas blinked at her again before pursing his lips in what looked like amusement. “You know, there used to be rumors about Caroline Carew—I believe she’d be your great-grandmother—keeping some sort of intelligent rodent as a pet. I don’t think anyone ever made the jump to ‘Carrie Carew keeps a colony of Aeslin mice.’ I’m sure there’d be something in the records.”

“You knew my great-grandmother?” Alice asked.

“No, she was before my time, but I learned all about your family in my field training, which included a lot of empty gossip.” Thomas closed the door. “Shall we? I don’t want to keep you out too late and get you into trouble.”

“I have time,” said Alice. She moved to pace Thomas as he stepped down from the porch. “What kinds of things did you learn about my family?”

“Names, descriptions, combat training. Your grandmother was pregnant when they left, so we knew there had been a baby, and some field operatives managed to learn his name about fifteen years ago. Apart from that, it was mostly warnings about not letting anyone with Carew blood get the upper hand, and always knowing where the exits were if you were dealing with a Healy.” Thomas gave her a thoughtful sidelong look. “I wonder which holds true for you, Miss Healy. You look very much in the Carew mold, if you don’t mind my saying so, and most of the Healys I’ve known have been more…restrained when it comes to dropping knives in front of relative strangers.”

“I’m more likely to stab you than I am to snare you, if that’s what you mean, and I have a name,” said Alice. “I’m only ‘Miss Healy’ when I’m in trouble at school. Which is most of the time. So if you could call me ‘Alice,’ that’d be swell.”

“All right, Alice. You can call me—”

Alice shook her head before he could finish his sentence. “I really, really can’t. You’re old enough to be one of my teachers. I’m not supposed to call adults by their first names. It’s rude, and it’ll get me in trouble at home if I slip and do it in front of my father.”

“I understand,” said Thomas. “I know it’s rude to ask a lady her age, but you said before that you were sixteen? Is that correct?”

“It is,” said Alice. “My birthday was a few months ago, during the summer.”

“Ah,” said Thomas. “At home, you’d be considered more than old enough for field duty. I’ll try to adjust my thinking, but you’ll have to be patient with me.”

“I’m not too good at patient, but I’ll try,” said Alice. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-six,” said Thomas. “I promise not to let my advanced age slow you down.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” said Alice.

They had walked across the field while they were talking, and had reached the edge of the wood. Alice stopped before they could step into the trees. Thomas gave her a curious look, but waited, letting her explain things in her own time.

“Do you have frickens in England?” she asked.

“Frickens?” said Thomas blankly.
“You know. Frogs with feathers. They hang out in trees and go ‘creep creep creep.’”

“Ah!” Thomas nodded. “You mean Anuraves. Yes, we have them.”

Alice looked at him like he had just sprouted an additional head. “No, I mean frickens. That other thing is a stupid name. It’s bigger than they are. Anyway, if you can hear them creeping, that means you’re probably okay; most of the predators around here scare the frickens, so they shut up when something nasty’s nearby.”

“They aren’t worried about humans?”

“Most people don’t go into the woods around here, and they’re used to me,” said Alice. “They know I won’t hurt them.”

“It must be very reassuring, to be a friend to frickens,” said Thomas solemnly.

“Don’t tease,” said Alice. “If you can hear the frickens, you’re probably okay—only probably, since there’s stuff that doesn’t upset them, like the giant flower that tried to eat me the other day. Watch where you step, and if something looks like a big mouth full of teeth that doesn’t want you to think it’s a big mouth full of teeth, don’t put your foot inside it.”

“Swamp hagfish?” guessed Thomas.

Alice nodded. “We have a lot of things around here with ‘swamp’ in their names. It wouldn’t be so bad if most of them would stay in the swamp, but they pretty much go wherever they want to. Mostly they stay in the woods. They don’t like going where there are too many people.”

“Wild animals generally don’t,” said Thomas. “I’m following you. Anything you refuse to step on, I won’t step on either.”

“I’ll hold you to that, too,” said Alice, and stepped into the woods.

They had been walking for no more than ten minutes when Thomas Price made his mind up about two very different, very important things. The first was that Alice was absolutely a Healy: she might look like her Carew forefathers, but she had the Healy smile, the Healy way of walking, and most of all, the Healy tendency to charge headlong into potential danger without pausing to look to either the right or left. The second was that it was a miracle she had lived as long as she had. Her mother—whoever that had been—must have brought something extra to the table, some indefinable degree of preternaturally good luck that she had then passed on to her daughter. It was honestly the only explanation for Alice still being among the living.

Case in point: she was standing some five feet away from him, a large stick in her hand, attempting to goad a boulder into attacking her. She was accomplishing this by poking the boulder briskly before dancing backward, almost losing her balance several times in the process. He was considering the relative merits of telling his local guide that he was tired of watching her taunt the rocks when the boulder had finally had enough. It split into several dozen palm-sized scorpions, all of them clacking their claws like castanets, and went scuttling off into the underbrush, leaving Alice laughing in its— their—in the boulder’s wake.

“See?” she said, sounding altogether too pleased with herself. “That’s what an igneous scorpion nest looks like. You gotta hit the rocks a few times before you sit down, or they’ll bite your butt right off.”
“I see,” he said faintly. He was going to have to get himself in Alexander’s good graces. If he didn’t obtain access to whatever field guides the elder Healy had composed since moving to Buckley, he wasn’t going to survive to falsify his first report back to the Covenant. “How were they, ah, discovered?”

“Some local kids didn’t hit the rocks before they sat down,” said Alice. “Closed casket funerals are pretty common among the families that live on the edge of the woods. Nobody talks about it. What good would it do?”

“If people are being killed by creatures—” he began, and stopped as Alice whirled on him, looking actively angry for the first time.

“You mean if people are going into the woods and bothering perfectly normal critters that are just trying to have normal lives?” she asked. “It’s one thing if the critters come into town and bother folks at home, but when you come into their habitat and make trouble, it’s your fault when bad stuff happens. The scorpions that killed those kids got killed right back, and you know what happened? Big explosion in the swamp hagfish population. Killed ten people. Everything’s connected. Until we understand those connections, we can’t just go around killing things!”

Thomas blinked slowly. “I was going to suggest posting signs warning people of quicksand and other believable hazards, but I appreciate your passion for conservation. I’m sure it will serve you well in your chosen profession.”

“Um.” Alice’s cheeks flared bright red. “I’m sorry. I just thought…”

“That because I was Covenant, I was about to suggest burning down the entire forest? Not an unreasonable supposition. It would even have been correct, in my younger days, when I was more interested in pleasing people who would never be pleased by anything I did.” Thomas smiled, a trifle wryly. “I assure you, I’m far more interested in learning about monsters than I am in hunting them. There’s more to learn from a live creature than a dead one.”

“Um,” said Alice again. “Yes. I mean…yes. There sure is. I mean. Um. This way.” Cheeks still red, she turned and forded deeper into the forest—although not, Thomas was pleased to note, in the direction previously taken by the igneous scorpions. While he was sure that they were charming creatures that had every right to their share of the swamp, he wasn’t particularly excited about the idea of meeting them without better boots. And Alice had stirred them up with a stick, just so he could see how they worked.

He was smiling as he followed her. He simply couldn’t think of anything else to do.

Alice’s blush had faded by the time he caught up with her, at the edge of a narrow creek. The frickens were singing overhead, marking the area as at least partially safe. She flashed him a quick smile, and asked, “Want to see something nifty?”

“That’s why I asked you to bring me out here,” he said.

“Then check it out.” Before he could ask what “it” was, she had plunged her arm into the bank of the creek, all the way up to her elbow. She felt around for a moment before pulling out what looked like a cross between a leech and a lamprey. It was easily a foot and a half long and, after a few seconds of squirming, wrapped itself around her arm, going still.

“A bloodworm!” said Thomas, delighted. “Oh, I didn’t know you had those here. What a handsome fellow.”
“Isn’t he just? He’s one of the bigger breeders around here. I bring them liver sometimes, so they stay in their burrows even when I have to pull them out for bleeding.” Alice held the bloodworm up so Thomas could get a better look. “He’s a sweetie. Barely ever bites at all.”

“Lovely,” said Thomas—and he sounded like he meant it.

Alice beamed. “You can usually find them around the creeks. Look for the little circular depressions in the mud. Depressions, not holes.”

“Hagfish again?” guessed Thomas.

“Burrowing vipers,” said Alice.

Thomas grimaced. “Tell me again how there’s anyone alive in this town? It seems like everything is actively trying to kill anyone foolish enough to stand still.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Most of the things that can be dangerous have been driven into the woods long since. They don’t come slithering down Main Street going ‘hiss hiss, I’m here to bite people.’ They mind their business, and as long as folks don’t come poking, things are pretty much okay.” Alice gently set the bloodworm back down on the creek bank. It squirmed into the mud and disappeared. “Sometimes scientists find a thing and it gets to turn ‘real,’ and then everybody knows it’s there. Only if it’s a dangerous thing, even if it’s been minding its own business in the woods for centuries, all of a sudden people feel like they have to kill it. I guess humans are just offended by the idea that there’s stuff out there that can make them die.”

“I think that’s a very good way of looking at it,” said Thomas. “What do you know about the history of Buckley?”

“Um. Founded in the 1850s, I think, still a township instead of a town—I don’t really know what that means, but I know that people get really cranky when you don’t refer to it by the right name—and we’re actually the second Buckley in Michigan. There’s also a Buckley Village over in Hanover County. They’re a lot classier than we are. They have fewer unexplained deaths and everything.” Alice wiped her hands on the legs of her dungarees as she started walking again. Thomas followed. “We have a Settler’s Day every October. I bet you could learn more there. Or you could ask my grandpa. He’s the head librarian, he knows everything.”

“You think he’d be willing to talk to me?”

“I think so. Just do it soon. He’s going to retire in a year or so, and then my father’s probably going to take his job.”

Thomas nodded. “Your father being the one who won’t talk to me.”

“Yeah.” Alice grimaced. “He’s worried that you’re here to twist my mind around until I think the Covenant are the good guys and agree to start killing things for you.”

“Well, you can assure him for me that that’s not going to happen,” said Thomas. “I have fond memories of many things about the Covenant of St. George, but there’s nothing about them that would make me try to recruit you to their cause. They’re…increasingly misguided in this day and age. And I doubt they’d take any recruit that I brought them.”

“I don’t think he’d listen,” said Alice.
“Maybe someday.”

Something rustled in the bushes ahead of them. Thomas shot Alice a look, waiting to see what her response would be. She cocked her head to the side, motioning for him to be still. He stopped moving. She was…fascinating in this environment. On his porch, she’d been all nerves and anxiety, dropping her knives, losing the power of speech if he so much as looked at her oddly. Here, in the forest, she was utterly at ease. If he was going to know her better, he rather thought it would need to be outside the house. And he did want to know her better, if only because he could see Buckley becoming very lonely, very fast. Having a friend might make things a little easier.

The rustling stopped, replaced by a soft, anguished peeping. Alice started moving again, heading quickly for the bush and leaning over to peer inside. Her face fell. “Oh, you poor thing,” she said. “Mr. Price, come see.”

Thomas came, and saw.

A lanky, mammalian thing that looked something like a raccoon, as drawn from the description of someone who had never actually seen a raccoon, was huddled in a ball at the base of the bush. Its long, stripy tail was wrapped around its body, several times. It chittered when it saw them, but there was no real menace in the sound: the creature was hurt, and it no longer had the strength to do anything but cry.

“It’s a tailypo,” said Alice. “There’s blood, see? Something must have taken a bite out of it. Probably the angler tortoises. They’re always messing with the tailypo, and the tailypo are smart, but not smart enough to figure out that they can’t take out an armored reptile three times their size.” She shrugged out of her coat. “I should be able to reach it.”

“Allow me,” said Thomas. She blinked at him. He shrugged. “I have longer arms, and my house is closer. We can take the—tailypo? Regardless, we can take it back to my place. I should be able to scrounge some sort of box and bedding for it to use.”

“Thank you,” said Alice. Her smile was very bright. “Mind the teeth, and careful you don’t pull its tail. Tailypo hate to have their tails pulled.”

“It seems to be mostly tail,” said Thomas. “I can understand the hatred.” He leaned into the bush, using Alice’s jacket as a blanket as he swaddled and lifted the tailypo. It barely struggled. “Hello. Yes, hello, strange North American mammal. You have a lovely tail. Let’s see if we can’t keep you alive for another season of doing whatever horrible thing it is you do.”

“Mostly they knock over trash cans and make weird sounds outside your window while you’re trying to sleep,” said Alice. “Come on. We need to go this way.”

She began backtracking their path through the wood. Thomas, holding the tailypo against his chest, followed her. The tailypo hung limp and resigned to its fate. It probably expected to be eaten. To be fair, it wasn’t an unreasonable expectation, based on what he’d seen of the woods thus far.

“How did you learn so much about the woods?” he asked. “You’ll forgive me if this sounds condescending, but you don’t talk like you were formally trained.”

“I wasn’t,” she said. “Haven’t been, and probably won’t be if my father has anything to say about it. He’s sort of against me being involved with the family business. He says it’s not ladylike or safe.”

“What does he expect you to do, then?” asked Thomas dubiously. He hadn’t known Alice Healy for
very long, but what he knew thus far didn’t leave much room for her becoming anything apart from what she was. She seemed to love the woods, and she definitely loved her knives.

“Get married and have about six kids and never set foot outside again,” said Alice. “If I really feel the need to have a career, he’d be happy with me teaching nursery school or becoming a library aide, I guess. He mostly looks pained when I bring it up, and then changes the subject.”

“I see.” So the latest generation of American Healys was expected to magically grow up to be a normal person. It seemed…unlikely, at best.

The trees were thinning. Alice all but skipped ahead, out into the light. “If we can use a cardboard box and an old towel—do you have old towels? You must, everybody has old towels—we can make a nice bed out on the porch. You don’t want a tailypo loose in your house. They have really clever hands.” She turned to face him, walking backward as she wiggled her fingers in demonstration. “They’ll take things apart if you give them the opportunity.”

“Are they intelligent?”

“No, but they’re wicked smart.” Alice dropped her hands. “It’s not always the same thing, you know?”

“I do,” said Thomas.

When they reached the house he climbed the porch steps and opened the door. “Will you come in?”

“No, thank you,” said Alice, sitting down on the steps. “I’ll wait here. You should fix your porch swing, you know. Then we could sit outside and talk.”

Thomas paused before quirking a faint smile. “Are you ever going to come inside?”

“Sure, if it’s raining.” Alice shrugged. “Creepy murder house. Not so fun for me.”

“I promise you it’s not haunted.”

For some reason, Alice seemed to find that particularly funny. “I know. No self-respecting ghost would haunt the old Parrish Place. I’ll be fine out here.”

“As you like,” said Thomas, and went inside.

As soon as she was alone, Alice stood, walked back down the steps to the yard, and drew a circle in the dirt with her toe. She sketched a large “X” through the center of it, like she was preparing to dig for buried treasure.

“Hey, Mary,” she said.

“Hey, yourself,” said a voice from behind her.

“Mary!” Alice turned and threw her arms around the girl standing behind her—a girl who looked to be roughly her same age, but whose hair was prematurely white, and whose eyes were the color of a hundred miles of empty highway. “I hoped you’d be close enough to hear me call.”

“I usually am,” said Mary. She let Alice go, giving her a quick but critical once-over before she said, “So what’s the story? You don’t need a babysitter. You outgrew me years ago.”
“I’ll never outgrow you,” said Alice staunchly. “And the story is that someone bought the old Parrish Place.”

“Wait, seriously?” Mary turned to look at the house. “Are they crazy? Did the old Parrish Place sell to a crazy person? Or a swamp cultist? Please tell me you didn’t call me here because you’ve decided to join a swamp cult. You’re supposed to call me before you do things I need to talk you out of.”

“No, no swamp cults,” said Alice. “I just wanted to introduce you to the man who bought the house.”

Mary blinked slowly. “What?”

“His name is Thomas Price. He’s a member of the Covenant of St. George.”

Mary’s mouth dropped slightly open as she stared at Alice. “What?”

“He was sent here to spy on us, but he decided that would probably end with him getting shot in the head, so he’s being friendly instead. He’s inside, setting up a bed for an injured tailypo we found in the woods.” Alice grinned at Mary’s expression. “I really mean it. He’s really doing it, and I think he’s kinda the bee’s knees. But he keeps making comments about his house being haunted, so…”

“You know, most people say ‘ghosts aren’t real,’ not ‘let me introduce you to my babysitter,’” said Mary.

“Most people are boring,” said Alice.

“Oh, hello.” They both turned toward the sound of a faintly puzzled British voice. Thomas was standing in the doorway, a cardboard box in his arms. “You must be a friend of Miss Healy’s. I’m sorry I can’t shake your hand, mine are a bit full at the moment.”

“Hi,” said Mary. “I’m Mary Dunlavy. I used to babysit for Alice when she was a little girl. She speaks very highly of you.”

Thomas frowned slowly. “When she was… I see.” He walked across the porch to a sheltered corner, where he put the cardboard box down, snug against the rail. Then he straightened, and turned back to the pair, already beginning to roll up his sleeves.

Mary raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t tell me he was a sailor.”

“I’m not,” said Thomas. “Since we’re on the topic of the undisclosed, you didn’t tell me you were deceased.”

“It’s always hard to work into a conversation, you know?” Mary spread her hands. “No one leads off with ‘and this is how I died.’ By the time it comes up naturally, it’s too late to say anything without giving someone a heart attack.”

“It’s okay,” said Alice. “Mary’s been dead since before she started sitting for me, and she’s never hurt me. Well, okay, she bumped my head a few times when she forgot that you can’t carry babies through walls—”

“I thought we agreed never to mention that again,” protested Mary.

“—but that could’ve happened to anybody. She’s lovely. You’ll like her. And she can prove that your house isn’t haunted, which was sort of the point of calling her.” Alice looked hopeful. “Really. Mary’s the best, and you don’t need to be afraid of her.”
“I wasn’t afraid,” said Thomas, before relenting, and asking, “What type of ghost are you?”

“Crossroads ghost, and don’t ask me what that means, because I’m not allowed to tell you,” said Mary.

Thomas’s face turned solemn. “I think I have some idea,” he said. “So my house is unhaunted?”

“Yup,” said Mary. “All the ghosts around here have better taste than that.”

“Told you,” said Alice.

“I shall never doubt you again,” said Thomas. “What do I feed my new guest?”

“If he seems to be recovering from his injuries, some chopped liver and whole eggs would be best,” said Alice. “That’ll help him heal up faster. Oh, and water, of course. Tailypo need water.”

Now it was Mary’s turn to look amused. “New to town and already playing animal hospital with Alice, huh, Mr. Price? You’re doomed. You should just accept your fate now, and save us all the trouble.”

“Alas, I have never been good at accepting my fate,” said Thomas. The corner of his mouth twitched, betraying the smile he was trying to conceal.

“Doomed,” repeated Mary. She glanced at the sky, and then back down to Alice. “Speaking of doomed, how grounded are you going to be if you don’t beat your father home?”

“Omigosh!” Alice clapped her hands over her mouth before rattling off, rapid-fire, “I had a very nice time Mr. Price I’ll be back as soon as I can to check on the tailypo I hope he’ll be okay I won’t blame you if he’s not okay bye!” Then she was running for her bike, swinging her leg over it, and pedaling off toward the road.

Thomas and Mary watched her go. Thomas was the first to speak.

“Is she always so abrupt?” he asked.

“Yup,” said Mary. “She’s still on her best behavior with you.”

“How can you tell?”

“Neither of you was covered in guts when I got here.” She looked up at Thomas. “Careful with her, okay? She’s sort of like the baby sister I never had. I won’t be thrilled if you break her heart.”

Thomas blinked. “I assure you, I have no interest in that direction. She’s sixteen. I have ten years and a lifetime of scars on her.”

“I’ve been sixteen for fifteen years now,” said Mary. “Sixteen year old girls have remarkably fragile hearts. Just be careful.”

“I will do my best,” said Thomas.

“Good.” Mary smiled at him and then, like a bubble bursting, she was gone.

Thomas looked at the place where she’d been for a few minutes before he turned, thoughtful, and walked back into the house. He rather thought he had some eggs somewhere, and he needed to make
notes on the day.

It had been surprisingly productive.

Alice beat her father home by no more than ten minutes. She had just flung herself into a seat at the kitchen table when he came in, looking tired and frustrated after his day at work.

“Hello, Daddy,” she said brightly.

“Hello, sweetheart.” He paused to kiss the top of her head. “Did you have a good day at home?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, nodding so fiercely that it felt for a moment like her head was going to come off.

Jonathan paused, seeing her dungarees—and more, seeing the mud on her thighs. “Alice?”

“She helped me move some wood from behind the barn,” said Enid, not looking away from the pot that she was stirring. “Winter will be here soon enough. It’s best to lay your stocks in while you can.”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Jonathan, relenting. “I’m sorry, Alice. For a moment, I just thought you might have disobeyed me.”

“No, Daddy,” said Alice, and smiled serenely.

Her father—who had yet to realize that in his quest for a more dutiful daughter, he was making a much better liar—turned to his mother. “What’s for dinner?” he asked.

“Spaghetti,” said Enid. “Go wash up. You, too, Alice. I want you out of those clothes and into something decent before you eat in my kitchen.”

“Yes, Grandma,” said Alice, bouncing out of her seat and running for the stairs.

“See you soon, Mom,” said Jonathan, and followed more sedately.

In very little time, Enid was alone at the stove. She sighed, content, and reached for the pepper. Things were finally changing again.

Maybe this time, they were changing for the better.